

Turning Back to God

MJCF February 6, 2022

Proverbs 14:12, Romans 7:14-25

The other day, Rie told me about a hiker who slipped and was killed while live-streaming his climb up Mt. Fuji. Many suggested that it was foolish for him to take unnecessary risks. Right away, it reminded me of a time when I was hiking on a mountain with a friend, several years ago. We were exploring a mountain without a trail. I figured it wouldn't be too complicated. We would just climb up, and the way home would be to just climb down. For a lot of things, my tendency is to think, "Oh, I can do that! It'll be easy!" But, sometimes things aren't as easy as I expect. Our mountain climbing took longer than expected and we were getting tired. On the way down, at one turn, we thought that we had found a good way to go, but a half an hour later, we realised that we were at a dead end. There were only steep cliffs all around us. To continue would be quite dangerous, but we really didn't want to climb back up the mountain in order to find a different way. So, we continued. I remember holding onto a stone foothold with the toes of one foot. I then needed to jump to another foothold and grab another nearby tree growing out of the rock. If I were to slip, the drop was straight down for maybe 50 metres. Thankfully, we were able to make it through to a safer spot and hike down. Looking back, I felt very relieved that we had no serious accident, but I realised that we had taken some very unnecessary risks. It would have been wise to take the extra time to go back the way we'd come, rather than continue.

Have you ever experienced that kind of a problem? You realise you've been going the wrong way for a while. What do you do? You might be able to find a new

way to go. But, sometimes you do have to go all the way back to where you started to go wrong. I thought how this is so much like our human tendency to go our own way rather than follow God. Today's passage from Proverbs says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death." We set goals according to what we'd like to accomplish, but how often do we set goals according to how we believe God to be leading? Everyone has sin. We are all in need of the grace and forgiveness revealed to us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. But, it's hard to stop and admit when we've been going the wrong way. It's hard to turn around and head back, and so we try to keep going, even though we may know deep down that we should really be turning around and going back to a place where we can more closely walk with God. At the beginning of his ministry on earth, Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) The good news is that God has come near to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus encourages us to repent (or turn back to God), and to believe. It's so easy to make ourselves "lords" of our own lives rather than admit that Jesus is Lord of all.

So, why is it so hard for us to turn back when we know we've been going the wrong way in some area of life? Just like hiking in the wrong direction, we may not want to waste time turning back, hoping to be able to somehow keep going. Maybe it's just too painful to admit that we have wasted so much time focusing on the wrong things. We may be sorry for going wrong, but true repentance is not just being sorry, it means a change of direction. We can't keep going the way we've come.

The key is that the change of direction is not something we can do on our own. We need the help of Christ in our lives. In one of my favourite Bible passages, the Apostle Paul shows us the challenge in trying to do good and follow God's laws. I'm reading from Romans 7:19-25, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!..."

Paul is talking about the reality of sin. It causes us to struggle. It's something that we cannot fix ourselves. It is only fixed by the power of Christ at work, in us. I've often felt this struggle. It's easy to see myself as being good enough. I'm a pastor. I read the Bible, and pray every day. And, I do my best not to harm anyone. But, God calls us way beyond those kinds of things. We are to be concerned for the people around us, because God is concerned for all people. I often struggle to give others more attention. It's so easy to just focus on my own things that need to be done – my message preparation, my appointments, my free time, and so on. It's easy to feel like I don't need to give attention beyond my own worries. But, by God's grace, I've felt deep down that there is something wrong with this direction. Something is not right. You may not see it so much on the outside, but inside of me, I feel like I need to

make some changes in how I connect with other people. I see this as likely a long process of working on my awareness of the needs of others around me. So, I continue to pray for the courage to follow God's leading in this area. In repenting of my lack of consideration for others, I pray that God will help me go in new directions. I pray for the courage to more and more let go of concerns for myself, and I pray that my awareness of Christ both within me, and in others around me, can increase.

In Paul's description of his struggle to follow God, did you catch the good news? We all struggle with the influence of sin in our lives. But, there is an answer to that. Jesus Christ is Lord. He is alive and at work, calling us back to the right paths. God knows our struggles. God won't let us go too long in the wrong direction without giving us some sort of nudge to help us see we need to repent and make a change. I sense God's calling within me when I feel something is wrong with how I've been going. I want to follow that call, wherever it takes me. I'd like to conclude this message with a story of someone who made a change, and I believe the change was by God's grace in his life.

Do any of you know the name of the inventor of dynamite? A lot of us have likely heard his name, Alfred Nobel. He was a Swedish chemist who invented the high explosive, named "dynamite," back in 1867. It's interesting that he thought his invention would make war so horrible that it would never happen again. Once people saw the awful effects of dynamite, they would surely stop inflicting that kind of pain on other people. Of course, he was wrong. Although he was now making a fortune on the sale of dynamite, Nobel was horrified that wars continued, even more

destructive than before.

Then, one day, he was surprised to see his own obituary printed in the newspaper! “Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before. He died a very rich man.” The paper had made a mistake. It was Alfred’s older brother that had passed away. Alfred was totally shocked at what he had read. He had hoped to create peace, but the end result was more destruction! Then, he had an idea. He founded the Nobel Peace prize, an award that would go to people who do something significant towards making peace.

I see that as an example of repentance. He not only regretted what had happened with his dynamite invention, he also made a change. Today, he is not just known for being the inventor of dynamite. By God’s grace, he is now also the creator of the world’s best known peace prize. Even when we’ve failed or hit a dead end, we can thank God for the grace that provides a chance for us to turn back. Let’s pray.

O Lord, we confess that we so easily fall into thinking that we’re good enough, rather than admitting our weaknesses and taking steps to change. Thank-you that you do not let us continue for too long in the wrong direction, that we do not need to be stuck in our struggles for too long. Open our eyes and grant us courage to look at those areas where we are in need of making changes. Grant us the courage to turn back, in order to get on a healthier path. Through Christ we pray, amen.